

Year A OS 19 Gospel Matthew 14.22-33 HTK 2020

By all accounts this a very strange happening in the lives of Jesus and his disciples.

Indeed one commentator goes so far as to suggest this was the most useless “miracle” in all the gospels. For him there is no obvious upside - like a healing or an exorcism or feeding the masses - the miracle here simply seems to be a demonstration that Jesus is “the son of God” and has the ability to do things that others have too much doubt to do. However he also acknowledges it would seem to be clear by now that Jesus is unlike everyone else. More troubling is the notion that Jesus performed some great feats in order to prove to people that he was capable of miracles. That seems to be an unworthy *raison d'etre* for miracles. Moreover, it's not necessarily the case that every miracle needs to serve a utilitarian purpose to find meaning in it.

A storm at sea is one of the most compelling symbols of chaos for seafaring folk it's the dreaded possibility when nothing is stable, and everything is in flux. Something that might be stable - a rock - would actually be a threat in a storm because the storm takes away the ability to navigate towards stability. It may well be that the storm here is a symbol for the chaotic moment for the disciples following the senseless execution of John the Baptist by Herod.

In the past few weeks I've had a not dissimilar experience to being in a boat in a rocking and raging sea. For the first time in my life I experienced Vertigo. it came on me without warning when I tried to get out of bed one morning and discovered to my horror the whole floor and all the walls we're moving. I was hardly able to stand for the next 24 - 36 hours I felt utterly wretched A magic pill known stemazine helped me to survive. Eventually I was helped by a physiotherapist who cured me on the spot with some extraordinary manoeuvres of my head It was an experience I hope never to go through again. It gave me a deal of sympathy for the disciples as they were battered in their boat on the sea of Gallilee that night.

So what is it that Mathew is trying to achieve with this story?

It seems that for him it is the shadow of the execution of John Baptist that hangs over the whole scene. John's death is why Jesus goes to the deserted place; John's death is why the crowd goes also; John's death is why Jesus gets concerned that they are like sheep without a Shepherd; John's death is why Jesus forcefully makes the disciples leave until he can disperse the crowd.

In response to John's death Jesus does not rally the crowd, he does not entice them to gather pitchforks and torches; he does not publicly denounce Herod or any of the above. He invites the disciples to participate in feeding a dispirited and hungry crowd. When they're all fit and satisfied Jesus forces the disciples to go

away. Now he comes to them in a very unusual manner which has the effect of demonstrating both the disciples fear and Peter's lack of faith.

I wonder if the storm and their inability to land the boat is a metaphor for the disciples' inability to navigate the waters of the Roman Empire. Jesus is not deterred by the winds and is able to navigate the waters unusually well. He even responds to Peter's command by commanding Peter to join him but ultimately Peter is unable to do so. His bravado was initially great, but his faith was ultimately too small.

And where do we now stand? During this pandemic, we too are encountering very choppy seas, where we seem to have no safe harbours either. Even being locked away in our own homes may seem far from safe. The encounters in the street, few though they may be, reinforce that sense of fragility. Like me you probably scan every face to see if everyone is masked, otherwise they pose a potential threat. A runner brushed past me the other day, not wearing a mask. But only some 20 metres or so further on she stopped and began an awfully slow shuffle. As though to say I really am running but not all the time.

Just to reinforce this feeling of fragility, I yesterday celebrated a Requiem Eucharist for my wife Susan, but since Brunswick is more that 5 km away, safely tucked away in my car was my

permit to travel, signed by the Vicar. Just in case a zealous officer stopped and asked where I was headed.

And here it is!

In his inaugural sermon the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby encouraged the church to be like Peter and get out of the safety of the boat.

We are called to step out of the comfort of our own traditions and places and go into the waves reaching for the hand of Christ.

The Archbishop is in no doubt that what Christians need most today is courage. The present challenges of environment and economy of human development and global poverty can only be faced with extraordinary courage he said. No doubt today, he would add COVID-19 and the global pandemic to that list.

Psalm 77 is a psalm pleading for help from God which calls to mind the awesome power of God in the crossing of the Israelites through the Sea of Reeds

When the waters saw you, O God when the waters saw you they were afraid; the very deep trembled ... Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.

May Jesus call us to come to him and may we respond with great faith.

